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Durant, Alan ORCID logoORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5208-4718> (1991) Noises
offscreen: could a crisis of confidence be good for media studies? Screen: the journal of the
Society for Education in Film and Television, 32 (4) . pp. 407-428. ISSN 0036-9543 [Article]
(doi:10.1093/screen/32.4.407)

Final accepted version (with author's formatting)

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Noises off-screen: could a crisis of confidence be good for media studies?

Alan Durant

The version of this article below is the author's pre-publication (AAM) version; the final version appeared in 1991, in Screen 32 (4), 07-428. ISSN 0036-9543.

Worth looking at, but *Screen* has always experienced difficulty in relating its concern with theoretical issues to the realities of educational practices, and remains, at the present time, very remote from the world of most media teachers. (1)

These words make up Len Masterman's entry on *Screen* in his useful Appendix, 'Resources for Media Education', in the 1989 reprint of *Teaching the Media*. But much has changed since then. *Screen* has been separated from SEFT, and re-launched from its new base in Glasgow. More significantly, perhaps, the field of media studies has both diversified further into a broader 'cultural studies', and settled into institutional niches sufficiently stable to make its self-image as marginal within the humanities and social sciences appear something of a flag of convenience.

It is arguable, nevertheless, that some things do not change. Many people would say, for instance, that *Screen* has remained largely aloof from the practical concerns of media education, much as Masterman suggests. Beyond this, some might want to add that the considerable influence the journal has exerted - particularly in the United States - has created more distant admiration, among practising media educationists, than active adaptation into new kinds of pedagogy. To say this is not necessarily to overlook the achievements of film theory over the last two decades. Nor is it to undervalue the force and political value of connections between work specifically on

film (and more recently television) and more general questions of cultural politics, especially as represented in feminism.

Even accepting these achievements, questions of the precise relationship between media scholarship and educational practice can seem problematic. For that relationship is troubled by at least three factors which aggravate the delicate interconnections needed between the theoretical emphasis of film and media research and the pedagogic emphasis required in teaching. The three factors I have in mind are:

1. The largely unexplored educational consequences of shifts in theoretical positions within media studies. Such shifts follow from self-critiques within the discipline, and a move away from a relatively unified theory-paradigm towards far more disparate (often philosophically irreconcilable) approaches.
2. The continuing pre-eminence of university/college-level discussion and theory, as opposed to school-based work. This has had the effect of marginalising debate, as regards school curriculum development, over the relative merits of specialised 'media studies' and more general or cross-curricular 'media education'.
3. The changing relations between media studies and cognate disciplines, such as English studies and sociology. All of these fields have significantly altered over the last two decades.

In this article, I explore a number of current difficulties of definition and practice within media studies. I suggest that, collectively, these may give rise to a sudden 'crisis of confidence' in the field. After assessing the relationship between media studies and other fields, especially English studies, I comment on three problems in media studies

in particular: issues of analytic method, issues of history and issues of language. Work in each of these areas has been made more rather than less problematic, as the result of media studies' evident aim of disentangling itself from the baggage of those disciplines from which it emerged historically. I do not suggest that media studies are therefore without value. Far from it: the need is overwhelming. But agreeing on the existence of a need does not guarantee the suitability of existing responses to that need - hence the questions I want to ask.

Historical backdrop: the rise of media studies

No two-page summary of the history of an academic field - even of a relatively short history, such as that of media studies - could be presented without recognition of its inevitable reductivism. But neither is any apology needed for presenting points for argument in the form of schematic historical narration, given that fuller accounts - at least of Anglo-American developments - are readily available (2). Reductivism is especially likely, in fact, in the case of media studies. It is made almost inevitable by a diversity of aims, methods and applications; by differences in institutional arrangements, such as the difference between British and American traditions; and by the deep divide which exists between school and university programmes.

But there is something more surprising than the diversity, given the history. Media studies is still as clearly describable in terms of what it has taken along - or thrown off - in its emergence from other fields (especially English studies and sociology) as in terms of its own current aims, methods or other defining properties.

From English into film studies and media studies

As is well known, some early versions of media studies defined themselves in relation

to - generally against - longstanding critical arguments in literary study. In many cases, the early polemic was against views such as F.R. Leavis and Denys Thompson's criticisms, in *Culture and Environment* (1933) and elsewhere, of the morally corrupting effects of popular cultural forms. (I.A. Richards is sometimes included with Leavis and Thompson in this type of critique, in a surprising isolation of his well-known fears of the cinema and the loudspeaker from his active involvement in radio and television, including his regular broadcasts on language and literature, his efforts to produce a television series of Plato's Republic, or his enthusiastic film-making apprenticeship at Walt Disney studios in 1942.) As well as being described in Alvarado, Gutch and Wollen, the early divergence from English have been traced in historical accounts of literary studies. (3)

What the early arguments in the history show most obviously is an inflection of the literary concern with questions of value, away from affirmation of quality in a high literary canon towards reflexive analysis of what value is, and of what motivates modern high culture/low culture distinctions. Perhaps most eminent in this strand of the history is the work of Raymond Williams. Throughout his theoretical writing, Williams connected study of the long history of forms of communication and representation with their contemporary manifestations: he proposed ways of linking analysis of the press, theatre, literature and essays with that of modern cultural forms such as film and television, not only in his work on communications, but also in his essay on the future of English Literature. (4)

There are affinities worth noting here, between the directions of this kind of historical investigation - though only much later, as regards its political commitments - and debates over 'technologies of the intellect' in studies of orality and literacy, which have also stressed a relationship between the development and use of technologies of writing in a society and that society's other cultural forms and mode of social organisation. (5)

Entangled in the critique of received ideas of cultural value, nevertheless, a potentially competing current in media studies has implicitly emphasised affirmations, rather than interrogations, of value: what amounts to a displacement of traditionally canonical works by interest in works traditionally considered of less value (such as melodrama, thrillers, soap operas, quiz shows or hit singles). This inversion of previously established canons precipitates, in turn, the development of alternative media canons: feminist canons; avant-garde canons; kitsch canons; pedagogic canons. As such canons are formed through repeated selection of the same works for scholarly analysis and for inclusion in syllabuses, they can begin to sit uncomfortably with some of the larger theses about postmodernism developed from them. Paradoxically the new configurations of texts can obscure one of the main interests which inspired them, interest in the process of (and often overdetermined reasons for) selecting texts in any particular way in a course or syllabus.

Arguably, as a result, when either a 'popular culture' or 'film culture' agenda is inscribed in a media studies syllabus, this is likely to represent an outcome of a process of historical and theoretical argument as much as any traditional canonical syllabus can be said to derive from an implicit theoretical position or agenda. Whereas Williams's arguments ranged across many forms and centuries (exactly work within a 'long revolution'), a 'popular culture' approach, especially if it deals primarily with twentieth-century materials, tends to presuppose a process of historical critique in order to act on its contemporary implications. Even where canonicity within film history is explicitly considered, for instance, discussion is almost inevitably separated from serious investigation of the much longer relevant histories of books and publishing, or of theatre - let alone the history of styles of oral discourse. Short-circuiting largescale historical questions which circulate in the definition of literary or artistic value, a media studies selection of texts is likely to adopt a blend of three main stances on the question: its own political programme, often of a

counter-hegemonic kind, signalling relative values of different texts included in the course (as in some traditional Marxist approaches, or in what have been called 'recruitist' directions in feminist teaching); a kind of cultural relativism, in which text selection becomes a sort of syllabus mix'n'match; or else an implicit belief in the progressive character of 'popular', 'non-elitist' forms of discourse which displaces the older question of what 'value' means with investigation of what 'popular' means. The separation of what I am calling here a 'modern, popular culture agenda' in media studies from a larger framework of historical analysis is one concern of my comments about 'history' below.

There is another line of development out of English which is relevant to the questions raised here. Each time students engage with a text in media studies, they call on skills of textual analysis; and media studies has developed a distinctive mix of descriptive and analytic skills. It has borrowed some skills from English (e.g. being able to comment on dialogue, knowing roughly what a metaphor is), then developed a new and more specialised terminology regarding specific audio-visual modes of discourse (pan, montage, point-of-view shot, parallel cutting, gendered spectatorship, etc.). These distinctive terms and concepts make possible descriptions of the specific rhetorics of sound and image: what is widely known as either film 'language' or the 'signs and syntax' of film. Much of this distinctive film-work evolved out of Saussurean traditions, developing gradually from an investigation of 'codes' into a concern to relate semiotics in a principled way to issues of subjectivity and ideology. As this work progressed - much of it in Screen itself - the word 'language' increasingly took on specialised senses; and in that process, use of the term diverged from its changing meanings in adjacent fields of linguistics and sociology of language. In media work in schools, during the same period, practitioners maintain that, partly because of the organisation of new school study programmes around speaking and listening, reading, and writing, there has been a great deal of overlap between work on written and

spoken texts (such as adverts, public announcements and newspaper articles) and the recorded speech which makes up much of the soundtrack of television and film discourse. Some of the consequences of different stages in the educational process presuming different ideas of what language means are the concern of my comments about 'language' below. Of special interest is the way that study of oral discourse, which in one obvious sense comprises much of television and film 'language', can disappear somewhere between literary definitions of English as analysis of the written, and the general 'signification' focus of media studies.

These concerns might well be of general interest to anyone curious about how the fields of film studies and media studies have arrived at their current terms of debate. But what makes them of more than general interest is a further important factor: that the development of media studies, in higher education at least, required a difficult, in many cases decisive, process of disciplinary break or institutional separation from the fields in which whatever work on media previously existed took place. In the early phases of media studies, arguments for studying media were often formulated partly as replies to orthodoxies of English. Such arguments (in many cases propounded by people working in English departments) could only be peripheral to prevailing versions of English studies at the time - though many of the questions are now more evidently part of what English studies is about. The recognition that concepts of authorship, for instance, need to be set within complex determinations of production industries - and the challenge of seeing an author as in complicated ways an 'effect of language', rather than seeing language as simply instrumental of an author's intention or creativity - provides an interesting illustration of the dialectical relation between the fields. Authorship arose first as a question in cinema studies as a way of claiming artistry and seriousness, on a par with literature or painting. Yet largely because media studies has shown why it is necessary to see authorship within social determinations, ideas of the 'author' within literary studies and in history of art have been slowly

inflected, in ways that earlier sociological work on literary authors or painters had largely failed to achieve.

Autonomy for media studies was almost certainly a precondition for general theoretical advance during that formative period. But quite apart from reasons associated with a different history (that of cinema, later of television), a different corpus (initially one of films, later also of television programmes), and a different investigative focus (social and institutional, rather than personal, readings), work on film and television is widely recognised as having required disciplinary separation for another reason: to secure a space in which to explore new kinds of textual studies with a different political, as well as theoretical, character and set of objectives. It needed space to grow, away from the need for defensive argument or the ping-pong of polemic and counter-polemic. It was perhaps this which was most at stake in the struggle for new departments during the 1970s and 1980s - and which now brings so much intellectual vigour to people's efforts to preserve the identities of those departments they set up.

Following the emergence of departments of film and media studies, concern with film and television in English departments has been confined to marginal gestures, such as commentary on token texts in modern literature courses; vague parallels between the literary and the filmic; and study of the processes of TV adaptation of novels and plays. It looks too much like disciplinary overlap, if more attention than this is given to media texts in English departments living next door to film or media departments. In schools, on the other hand, the question of overlap between media study and work on written and spoken texts continues to be handled differently. In Britain, English teachers and media studies teachers in schools are very often the same people; and through the organisation of project-work, it is straightforward to interconnect work on different media. But the situation is not static, either in higher education or in schools. Even in universities, where educational

innovation, at least in Britain, seriously lags behind, English studies have changed and continue to change, to the extent that an institutional realignment of media studies and English may now be a good idea.

Out of Sociology

During the same early phase in the history of media studies (and in Britain in part through the bridging presence of Raymond Williams, as well as the work of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies), arguments developed for media studies to grow out of - to outgrow - sociological studies, especially as further refinement of the sociology of leisure and of literature. Such specialisation brought about the emergence of early forms of mass communications research and cultural studies. Often growing out of work on nineteenth-century cultural and entertainment forms (such as the popular novel, promenade concerts, the press or magazines), work along these lines came to emphasise research problems such as the relationship between quantitative content analysis and the effects of television (including those which may result from depictions of sex and violence); issues of bias (and how bias can be determined on the basis of empirical research, as in the influential work of the Glasgow Media Group); and problems of the diversity and stratification of media audiences (often assessing the relationship between centralised power to influence attitudes through widespread distribution of 'enjoyable' texts, and local, idiosyncratic conditions of reception) (6).

In conducting research of this type, theoretical work has increasingly offered sophisticated ways of relating texts (and the conditions of their production) to patterns in terms of social consumption and the circulation of ideologies of gender, race and nation. More than other areas of investigation, feminist research on women's lives, values and attitudes, on women in education, and on women and culture, demonstrate the political value of close attention to the ways in which cultural forms are also sites of

ideology - with television emerging as a prime agent for the reproduction of social values, and therefore unequal relations of power. Given the more evidently pleasure-driven forms of ideology which distinguish film and television from, say, public health notices, school classes or family rituals, out of the general concern with ideology gradually emerges the distinctive interest of modern cultural studies in a politics of pleasure: pleasure as something socially constituted and regulated, and distinctive kinds of which can be speculatively correlated with different kinds of text. By drawing on works of the Frankfurt school, too, and later on Althusser, cultural studies was able to mark out a critical element previously undervalued in sociological research: it injected a needed theoretical dimension into established empirical and ethnographic methodologies.

What is perhaps most significant in this strand in the history of media studies is the way it has emphasised concern with the relationship between texts, sub-cultures, institutions and ideologies: a concern that, despite a long history of Marxist literary criticism, was struggling to appear at all back in English studies, where literary and non-literary texts might, in different circumstances, have reasonably been expected to be studied in analogous ways (7). The development of cultural studies approaches has foregrounded recognition of media as social and institutional - specifically as social institutions caught up in the economic and political relations of modern industrial and post-industrial societies. As a consequence of such work, it has become difficult to see cultural forms (whether films, radio programmes, CDs or T-shirt designs) as individual texts for discrete interpretation, as in the traditional emphases of English studies.

Here again, a dialectical relation between media studies and the disciplines from which it emerges can be seen. As regards English, the fact that books are things produced, published and marketed, with analysable social profiles of readerships and a variety of different social uses (for reading on the train, in the seminar room, at bedtime, etc.) has become much more of an issue for English as a result of audience

research and reader-response study - much of it in media studies. So has the relationship between popular fiction, magazines and canonical 'literary' works. For sociology, on the other hand, media studies has had a different lesson: it demonstrates the necessity of acknowledging the centrality, in analysing social structures, of texts and modes of representation, ranging from books and other documents, through myths, rituals and other forms of social behaviour; it also indicates the importance in analysis of concepts of pleasure.

For the purposes of this article, however, there are two salient issues in the history. Firstly, there are difficulties now presented by changing theoretical claims, made in cultural studies approaches to media, of linkage between subjectivity, textuality and ideology (especially between strongly deterministic 'subject position' arguments, and weaker, 'preferred reading' emphases). Secondly, there is the relationship between critical modes of work, on the one hand, and a vocational aspiration and sense of identificatory pleasure which underpin much current student interest in the field, on the other. Contradictions between Marxist-influenced condemnation and postmodern celebration of often the same texts and institutions deeply problematise any non-pluralistic philosophy of education which seeks to promote media studies as a pedagogy geared to critical media literacy.

Practical work and training

One of the main, formative difficulties of media studies has been its ways of relating reflective theory and ongoing practice - or, to put things a slightly different way, its ways of deciding whether 'practice' in a study programme means learning a theory; performing critical discourse analysis on given texts or institutions; researching an industry; or making films and tapes.

It is therefore significant that the third, 'vocational' tradition in media

education - technical training, either in specialist film schools, or more generally in school education - is often considered a poor relation. This is the case not only literally (in that it is widely under-resourced); it is sometimes also thought to be tainted by its closeness to professional training for the industry, and with the development of instrumental 'skills' rather than those of critique. The 'poor relation' status is typically reflected in how practical components are made to fit with critical elements in syllabuses, and in what proportion. It can also be seen in the way that it is very often different (and generally less senior) members of staff who are involved in practical teaching, and that different external examiners are often called in to assess student work. In Britain, the unequal relationship is also clear in the way that practical media work has come to prominence far more in Further Education College 'Communications' teaching than in university departments. Despite this unequal relationship with the other traditions of media studies, practical work nevertheless provides much of the inspiration among students to take communications and media courses. It is also implicitly, or for many students explicitly, connected with the possibility of media employment; and dissatisfaction is sometimes expressed by students where the gap between media studies courses and potential media employers is too openly revealed.

The history of the 'training' dimension of media work, which at university-level is more widespread in the United States than in Britain, is one of uneven development. Re-living many of the difficulties faced by writing and journalism courses in higher education, courses in film-making gradually emerged in institutions such as the National Film School, in some polytechnics and colleges of art, and as postgraduate courses at a number of universities. During the same period, practical media work in schools was increasingly recognised as of value as 'creative expression' (it was given early praise, for instance, in the 1963 Newsom Report); and small-scale creative work gradually developed in the context of 'progressivist' or 'New English' approaches to

teaching English in schools, because of its ready compatibility with the dominant pedagogic modes of project-work and groupwork methodology. (8) Since the 1960s, some degree of creative work has been incorporated in school provision wherever technology and classroom numbers permit (with students creating magazines and school newspapers; devising miniature advertising campaigns; writing and editing film scripts or storyboards from short stories; setting up mini-radio stations, etc.). Shifts in technology have lowered costs and made such work easier.

Several difficulties arise for the definition of media studies from this kind of work. For instance, evaluation of practical production (especially of collaborative work) challenges customary academic models of assessment. New kinds of educational thinking therefore have to take place, to permit assessment of tapes, diaries of production, model budgets and the various other products of creative media work. Given the educational culture of higher education - despite precedents set by procedures in departments of photography or painting - this area of evaluation remains underdeveloped. Advances are held back by a divide between academic and training cultures in education which continues to be replicated in the very identity of media studies.

The more pressing question for practical approaches to media studies, however, concerns the ways in which they devise procedures for relating theory and practice. In such relationships the difficulties of technical, scholarly and critical practices converge; and the politics - at both general and 'tactical' levels - are most open to question, and so most in need of open debate. One problem concerns the consequences of the disparity between oppositional 'critical analysis' traditions and mainstream radio, television and film production. As regards practical work, oppositional theory pairs most directly with kinds of alternative practice: feminist film production, avant-garde work and community media. This emphasis (partly qualified during the 1980s by the popularity among students of pastiche adverts and music videos) can appear to drive a wedge

between the practice element and the industry-oriented training dimension of media studies. Partly for reasons of production cost, too, little attention is generally given to producing genres of popular television (quiz shows, soaps, thrillers, etc.), despite their recent revaluation in much critical commentary. This lack of interest in producing mainstream television genres highlights a problem in conceptions of 'popular culture' forms. Popular cultural texts are critically celebrated, but not actively contributed to. Instead active contribution continues more to reflect a tendency towards irony in popular culture prevalent in theory, and so rejoins avant-garde practice - in effect largely side-stepping recurrent theoretical questions of value when it comes to making, rather than commenting.

How many directions in media studies?

The general point of the brief sketch presented here - with all its omissions and tendency towards caricature - is a self-evident, but often neglected one. Media studies programmes (like programmes in virtually all other academic fields) are composites, having forged apparently distinct identities out of a range of often contradictory materials in an overdetermined history. The current phase of media education work, with its further sub-specialisations (e.g. the separation of film studies from media studies, and from cultural studies), is one of internal reorganisation and refinement; but in that process of specialisation a range of more foundational issues in the history return.

It is arguable, for instance, that in the process of media studies disentangling itself from work within disciplines such as English and sociology, new pedagogic problems have been exposed as much as older problems resolved. This is the result of the way that the selectiveness which underpins further specialisation has the effect of narrowing down the set of questions likely to be asked even as, historically, the field of

cultural analysis is being opened up.

To investigate this claim, it is necessary to look at emerging difficulties of media studies more closely. Before doing this, however, it is worth identifying four distinct emphases in what I have so far referred to generically as 'media studies':

(a) Communication studies. Such studies involve, predictably, analysis of theories of what 'communication' is, technologies and institutions, concepts of information, speech and gesture. Studies along these lines range from sociological approaches to mass communication (including in distinct Departments of Mass Communication) through to applied discourse and conversation analysis (including in distinct Departments of Speech Communication⁹). With such an emphasis, it is reasonable to expect analysis of concerns as various as 'communication audits' (who talks or writes to who, what are the communication networks, in a hospital or large corporation); study of writers such as Habermas, Rorty or Wittgenstein, on possibilities for mutual or social understanding; work on the ethnography of speaking; studies of selling television or newspaper advertising space; techniques of public address. The general orientation of this broad definition of 'media studies' - often distinguished in higher education with its own name, 'Communication Studies' - allows either critical or vocational inflection. It can even blur the distinction between a resolute desire to resist ideological manipulation and a crude desire to learn how to achieve exactly that.

(b) More narrowly, there is film studies, focused in the specificity of film as a cultural practice and of cinema as an institution. Typical topics investigated include individual films and directors; specific questions of textual analysis, such as montage; the development of theoretical understanding of film 'artistry';

structures of gendered spectatorship; periods, traditions and genres; analysis of the cinema as an institution and economy based around theatrical exhibition; and research into national and regional cinemas. To preserve its identity as a field, nevertheless, this emphasis has to maintain the distinctiveness of film, within an industrial complex of production and distribution increasingly linked to television, advertising through product placement and marketing of soundtracks, and home-video. It has also to counter arguments against its cultural centrality which are based on the eclipse of cinema by television and pop music as the defining popular art-forms or cultural experiences of the end of the century.

(c) Combining interest in film with radio, television and other media, a more general media studies emphasis typically explores television as an environment, bringing together issues of technology, delivery systems, policy and institutions. Radio is also studied, though less; and attention is likely to be given to MTV, satellite and the contemporary press; networks of cross-media ownership; conventional representations of gender and race; bias and censorship; theories of media, from television 'flow' to postmodern video art; sometimes also selected genres of photography (especially photo-journalism). The continuing definitional question is that of the relationship between textual or rhetorical analysis and institutional analysis, and the need to develop pedagogies which can demonstrate non-reductive connections between the two. There is also the problem of adopting a definition of media that includes all the above in its semiotic perspective, while excluding theatre, painting... and books, including literary ones.

(d) Broadening again, 'popular culture and contemporary cultural' studies see

film and television as instances of more general phenomena: forms and institutions which produce social meanings (sport, fashion, pop music, comics, etc.). Working through sub-cultural and ethnographic, as well as semiotic, analysis, such work addresses issues of the significance of style, and can range (in this respect, like (a)) from critical study to empirical research on behalf of marketing industries. A problem of precise focus remains, however. Current responses are formulated mainly in terms of concepts of 'popularity', 'industry', 'resistance', 'desire', or the political valorisations of popular culture (from the sub-cultural significance of local garage bands to the international significance of Madonna).

When isolated in this way, each emphasis is troubled by its own boundaries. One of the difficulties in distinguishing them, in fact, arises from the way that, in many institutions, a general version of communication studies or cultural studies subsumes a range of different kinds of work in film studies and media studies. In Britain, in many circumstances - given the resource constraints on higher education - the combinations of material which make up courses in practice reflect a range of planning factors besides any worked-out intellectual balance of elements or theoretical project. Practical constraints - and disparate interests, skills and intellectual histories of staff members - invite pragmatic definitional blurrings. What seems surprising, nevertheless, is how easily a sudden identity-crisis in media studies can be precipitated by posing an obvious pedagogic question: as regards teaching, is the field's identity conferred by theoretical coherence (if so, around what?) or by an accepted educational pluralism?

Three trouble-spots

The problems inherent in the question of coherence are not, finally, only to do with the

corpus of texts or specific institutions being studied. Other types of question are at stake. Is television an 'art' in the specific senses that many film critics argue that film is? Does *Citizen Kane* fit any more closely with Kylie Minogue than with Franz Kafka or Katherine Mansfield? Should 50s films be on the same syllabus as 501s? Such questions call for worked-out responses to meta-questions of educational purpose and planning; and it is probable that, except where programmes are constructed on the basis of a very precisely-defined theoretical position, programmes are content to act out unresolved complexities of the history of the field, as much as to plan on the basis of explicit criteria.

Could such criteria be found to support current definitions and priorities of the field? I want to explore this question, by taking as exemplary issues the intellectual responses made in media studies (taken in the general sense) to questions of 'analytic method', 'history' and 'language'.

Analytical methods

Questions of research method are difficult in each of the sub-specialisms (a) to (d) listed above. This is partly because of the diversity of approaches that have to be learned, and between which choices have to be made: historical, sociological and ethnographic techniques, necessary for the study of audiences and institutions; textual approaches, to facilitate even basic description of what is being viewed. Beyond these, there are frameworks of what might be called the psychoanalytic diaspora, where concepts such as suture or voyeurism depend finally on commitment to psychoanalysis and are only (in some sense) provable in analytic practice. Alongside these, there are practical approaches and reflections on them (budgeting; directing; lighting; off-lining, etc.).

It might be argued that what distinguishes the field of media studies is that

different approaches have to a large extent blended productively, under pressure of energetic theoretical self-critique. The study of voyeurism in cinema-viewing, for instance, interconnects notions of textual interpretation, structures of pleasure and subjectivity, and the apparatus and institutions of the cinema. Questions of genre bring together formal regularities in a selected corpus with historical and production conditions of the industry, and 'rules' for production and attribution of meaning to texts. Studying montage relates production techniques to understandings of the role of editing in creating meanings, and to structures of fascination and desire in the moving image. As regards method, then, it might be said that what constitutes the substance of the field's interdisciplinarity is its new 'set' of research concepts and procedures.

Questions of unity, consistency and compatibility can still be asked of these procedures. One thing in common across the various strands is a way in which they have coincided with a nexus of developments in 'theory' which are not reducible either to sociology, media studies or English: psychoanalysis (Kristeva and Lacan); language and semiotics (Barthes, Bakhtin); theories of ideology (Althusser), political theatre (Brecht); and notions of fundamental shifts in cultural formation (Jameson, Lyotard). For a short time, many of these elements were forged on the film studies anvil of what came to be called Screen theory. But with the unsettling of many of the theoretical positions that such work legitimised, dominant influences have come from elsewhere: from more recent directions in feminism, from Foucault, postmodernism, and to a lesser extent from deconstruction. Through feminism especially, theoretical developments have retained links with political practice, and allowed a cue to be taken from notions of tactical or strategic appropriacy. In British secondary education, meanwhile, alongside prevailing currents of anti-sexism and anti-racism, the intellectual and political links have in effect been back towards humanistic educational values, such as that of independent critical learning as part of informed and participative citizenship.

The brief sketch of theoretical provenance offered here serves to highlight problems which become apparent as the field of media theory is viewed at greater distance. While suggestive and challenging individual commentaries can readily be written within any of the given theoretical genres, there remains a problem of adjudicating between them. As regards teaching, there is also the problem of generating interest in accounts of media texts which claim attention while proclaiming the impossibility of theoretical metadiscourse. During a period in which no single theoretical paradigm predominates, there is a need for research projects which seek to establish new grounds of argument - and to make clear their points of consistency and incompatibility with current orthodoxies of teaching - more than for (possibly more prevalent) historical or 'text as case study' projects.

The need for speculative work seems pressing. It is widely recognised that the theoretical project of media studies served during the 1970s and 1980s as an institutional opportunity for left colonisation. But the opportunity for any given political orientation to occupy the domain of media studies now depends on new definitions of that domain, either by aim, corpus or techniques of investigation. Institutional identities require constant reproduction and updating, but media studies now rests on a necessary contradiction of methods. The 'coherence' of Screen theory and related positions coexist with other approaches in what requires, pedagogically, either a commitment to an unconvincing 'progressive tendency' umbrella, or else to a metastructure of liberal pluralism.

Is this the climate in which specialisations within media studies are best made? As regards pedagogy, film provides an instance where arguments for teaching the field separately have explicitly drawn attention to its specificity. But it is worth considering the educational implications of translating this concept into educational practice. The theoretical definition of film as 'specific' arises at a level of critical argument beyond either basic considerations of ideology and culture (which can be instanced in most

cultural forms), or other cross-media questions (e.g. questions of genre, intention and interpretation). It is improbable that questions of film genre have nothing in common with problems of literary genre, radio genre or genre in painting or photography; or that issues of authorship in cinema have no relation to questions of authors in literature or of composers in music; or that 'reality-effects' in cinema have no relationship with issues of realism in literary narrative or historical narration. Equally, it is difficult to argue that ideology in film has to be investigated separately from ideology in posters, comics or church. Most of the impetus of 'theory', in relation to gender or ethnicity for example, has been in the opposite direction. The 'specificity' of film can be an enabling theoretical construct, but one which is not easily carried over directly into the organisation of teaching. (10)

The educational, rather than theoretical, questions which then arise for film and media studies are these: at what point in any given programme of study should areas of commonality of enquiry and method be replaced by focus on the specificity of one medium, form or institution? How is it possible for work on film, as a specific practice, not to presuppose general arguments about genre or ideology that will have to be taught elsewhere - or else actively taught in film studies, but with extensive illustrative reference to other fields? These are central and unavoidable questions; and alongside work of general theoretical enquiry, therefore, it might be predicted that at present media studies would be energetically engaged with such arguments.

Disciplinary separation certainly allows different access routes into advanced media studies (from art history, from sociology, from literature, etc.). But at the same time, it has another effect: it restricts scope for the contrastive analysis. Increased specialisation within media studies in universities - a move away from more polyglot aspirations of intellectuals after 1968, partly as a result of the arrival of 'second-generation' specialist media studies teachers - further narrows the reference-base for contrastive investigation. Without subscribing to Masterman's view

of 'media studies across the curriculum', it is possible to query the educational appropriacy of a possible fetishisation of 'film scholarship', as compared with the broader world of difference in social discourses which is evident in 'language and communication' studies.

Histories

Recent research in film and media studies has added impressive scholarship to the history of film and television. But there are two major ways in which their accounts of history remain problematic. Firstly, there are questions of how directions in the field's own development relate to current pedagogy. Secondly, there are problems surrounding where the start-date is set for the media history selected for consideration in any given programme of study.

The history of the field's own development is problematic because some ways of representing it can obscure shifts of epistemic modality that appear necessary in teaching, when using concepts from earlier phases of theoretical work. Film-theory pedagogy currently draws - possibly confusingly - on at least two conflicting traditions for representing its own history. There are historicist accounts, which view the concepts of film theory as dialectical building-bricks; concepts introduced - such as ideas of positioning or specific understandings of spectatorship - are presented as both established (in effect, the correct way to understand things), and yet as also provisional or problematic. Students have to go beyond the factivity of lectures and articles to check up on the troubled history and current status of concepts in order to find routes through minefields of 'vulgar' usage; and their use of such concepts is often protected by increasing numbers of scare quotes. On the other hand, there is a tradition of finally nostalgic presentation - such as Lapsley and Westlake's otherwise valuable introduction to film theory in Britain¹¹; writers in this tradition see the exacalibur of film theory as

being very much back at the bottom of the lake, with media studies facing a political 'holding operation'.

What is in question is not just how the history is told, but how that telling shapes the pedagogic practice of media teachers. Importantly, there are inherited frameworks and vocabularies which can easily become, in teaching, not only separated from the history of their development, but also detached from the intellectual frameworks or contexts of practice in which they make sense. If such ideas are not to be presented dogmatically, then supporting frameworks - e.g. for concepts derived from psychoanalysis and semiology - need to be introduced within a broader history of ideas; specifically, theoretical concepts need to be worked through in comparison with other, conflicting accounts and approaches - not all of which are self-evidently misguided or politically reactionary.

Alongside these questions of the history of media studies itself, there are issues regarding the presentation of the history of communication and media. In planning courses, decisions are understandably made to introduce historical 'background' or context starting from beginnings of the relevant technology and/or institutions. But such origins are always problematic: the 'hundred years of cinema' could be dated differently on the basis of alternative technological and economic watersheds (the Zoetrope gives a beginning in the 1830s, the photographic magic lantern one in the 1850s, the activities of the Lumiere brothers one in the 1890s). Textual landmarks can offer a different picture again (1895? Or relevant antecedents in Victorian melodrama?). When newspapers, radio and television are included in the definition of study, dates open up further: should studies take in the eighteenth-century development of newspapers and journals, or only the nineteenth-century development of a commercial publishing industry based on steam-printing? Should 'historical background' begin with the invention, in the 1840s, of the telegraph; or, in the 1870s, with the invention of the telephone and phonograph? Can students reasonably skip

what some might now regard as pre-history, beginning straightaway with radio, television and fully-fledged talkies in the 1920s and since?

One justification for keeping the history short is that it is not possible to study everything; so boundaries must be set. But boundaries not only limit, they also constitute. Opportunities for making connections and contrasts can be lost when a programme reduces historical scale. Nor can it be assumed that students - at whatever levels of an education system - will have acquired the larger history from other subjects they are studying (the relation of film history to the histories of the press and of theatre is illuminating in this respect). What might be seen as a narrowing or foreshortening of history can undermine media work in a number of respects: as regards what the terms 'communication' and 'communications' mean (face-to-face interaction, signs, rivers and roads, only later modern electronic networks and systems); as regards modes of employment (not only camera operators and disc jockeys, but authors, booksellers, agents, censors, editors); and as regards the mix of different discourse forms in the public domain, shaping the long history of orality, literacy and secondary orality.

The question for debate in all of this is: does the long history of communication in society have to be reduced and shortened, to allow study in any kind of depth or specificity? Or is it, in fact, only possible to make sense of the present by selective but much larger, contrastive studies across contexts and periods, adopting the pedagogic principle of broad contrast to show up the scale of potential difference? The case is at least arguable that study of larger shapes in the history of communications - from cave paintings and the development of scripts, through printing, megaphones, postal systems, libraries, newspapers, telephones and television - may be a precondition for discovering, rather than merely being directed towards, questions it is relevant to investigate as regards the specific, contemporary forms and influence of electronic media and institutions.

Language

Despite the fact that media studies has been centrally concerned with the concept of language, it has not always been interested in language in the sense of spoken discourse or utterances. This is another respect in which media education in schools parts company with much media education in universities. While in secondary schools, work takes place on the language of texts such as adverts - so contributing to the development of skills of more general linguistic analysis - in universities 'language' in media studies tends to follow a distinct tradition of its own. While there is a considerable volume of work in critical discourse analysis and media stylistics (11), this work has tended to remain marginal within media studies programmes more directly influenced by specific readings from Saussure.

In the development of film and television theory, first active understandings of language come from Saussure's work, as selected parts of the *Course in General Linguistics* are developed, following the proposal of a new science of semiology, into a more general structuralist account of signs. (Before this, it has been suggested, language was assumed simply to distort or misrepresent a more direct truthfulness of the image). Early work by Metz and others formulated semiotic principles in order to investigate codes of film language, defining concepts of film syntax using notions including that of contiguous relations offered by the concept of the syntagm. What distinguishes later directions in this tradition, however, is that the concern with codes was quickly inflected towards the relation of the text to the subject or viewer, initially through ideas of Althusserian misrecognition, then through Lacanian and other readings of subjectivity, sexuality and textuality - often in terms of positioning.

Metz's writings are not only detailed investigations of film; they mark a milestone in the linguistic analysis of metaphor and metonymy. What happens in the traditions of work which derive from Metz, nevertheless, is that 'language' becomes

used increasingly figuratively: the problems of the subject in language, as part of a theoretical problem of linking signification with ideology and with the economy, overtook concern with the detail of what goes on in any given utterance. Because of the particular questions it was asking, discourse analysis in media theory came to mean primarily Benveniste - then later, in a shift away from linguistics altogether, Foucault and selective ideas from Bakhtin - during the same period when linguistic analysis of discourse began to draw extensively on emergent work in pragmatics. For most purposes, the distinction between use of 'language' to mean spoken or written utterances (and the ways they create meanings), and 'language' used to mean the compound signifying processes of film and television, is clear enough. But the divergence began to create difficulties, when film theory began more to recognise that processes of interpretation of a text are governed by factors other than interaction of structures of the text itself with psychical structures and structures of the cinema apparatus; such processes involve at least - in addition to a variety of aspects of social context - also important cognitive processes of inference which cannot be investigated, except at a disabling level of generality, by appeal to modes of discourse analysis derived from Foucault or Bakhtin.

Despite exposure of the need to look in much greater detail at elements which make up the composite discourse of film and television, the relatively marginal field of media stylistics has still not come to any prominence in media studies, at least in higher education. Indeed, given the persistent idea in theories of narrative of the image-track as a kind of metalanguage or 'truthful discourse', it is reasonable to maintain that there is still a symptomatic inattention in media studies to soundtrack. (12) This is the case despite the way in which practitioners in the industry refer to many genres of television as merely 'radio with pictures'. As regards debate over television advertising, too, relatively little interest has been shown in, for example, Michael Geis's *The Language of Television Advertising*, which relates questions of responsibility for claims made in

advertisements to systematic - if now dated - analysis of pragmatic inference, seeking to relate the level of textual analysis to questions of intervention in law and social policy. (13) Media studies can become so involved in investigating the language of cinema that it no longer sees itself as needing to talk precisely about language in cinema.

To check whether this is actually a problem, it can be useful to discuss with students the specific meanings created by intonation in a given stretch of dialogue, or to invite comments on the semiotics of accent. The theoretical question of the limitations of 'metalanguage', in such circumstances, can seem of little concern, by comparison with the usefulness of developing a metalanguage that might in due course be questioned.

That descriptive work on language can be of importance may be evident in the following list of possible areas for closer attention: the relationship between written scripts and spoken dialogue; the generically-defining properties of prosodic and paralinguistic features of speech, in horse-racing commentary, football results, continuity announcements, news-reading, etc.; use of repetition and other forms of distinctive patterning in speech-to-camera and in disk-jockey talk; the semiotics of accent, fully across cinematic production and television output (especially in context of international film distribution, through which accent distinctions take on new and different meanings); the role of intonation in creating information structure in spoken discourse, and so in creating point-of-view and, potentially, bias; use of 'selectors' in constructing mode of address in television and radio. Work in such areas can also have a historical dimension. It might investigate, for instance, the shift in mode of address, in the history of television documentary and Outside Broadcasting genres, which accompanies changing responses to the split communicative contexts of television's 'communication events'; from use of registers appropriate to the context of utterance in early broadcasting ('addressing the nation'), the style of announcements has gradually moved towards registers appropriate to the context of reception ('inviting

someone into your home'). Topics for study of this kind merely illustrate the way that features of speech contribute to the meanings of media texts, as they become, when recorded, a new kind of textual writing. The contribution of such 'spoken writing' to our contemporary media environment can only be studied by combining interest in general and theoretical questions of discourse with attention to matters of detailed description.

One argument for not pursuing this kind of linguistic analysis is that students will already possess skills for descriptive language-work before they examine media texts in specialist courses. But this is a disingenuous position. Not only does it fail to reflect most media studies teachers' experience, it views awareness about discourse as something decisively acquired, rather than something to be cumulatively explored. It also underestimates the extent to which investigations of recorded dialogue require as much delicacy as analyses of other aspects of film or television 'language'. A more precise form of the same argument, effectively for not giving time to such work in university programmes, is that recent emphasis on oracy in schools - where speaking and listening have now been incorporated into curricula - will enable students to connect their school-work on kinds of spoken discourse generally with media discourse in particular. A difficulty then arises, however - in what is for media studies another 'generation' question - as students who have been schooled in analysis of spoken discourse move on to university: how will media studies teachers in universities respond to the insights and frameworks of discussion students bring to class, when their own analytic terminology regarding discourse operates within so specialised, or circumscribed, parameters)?

Prospects

My argument is this: the force and decisiveness of media studies' separations from the

disciplines out of which it emerged not only precipitated a phase of outstanding theoretical work, it also created a serious hiatus between film and media theory and other cognate fields. Following qualifications to a wide range of theoretical positions in media theory during the 1980s, the established shape of the field may now be held in place partly by what may amount to various types of intellectual foreclosure. If this is so, then it is a situation which invites renewed discussion of the basic coherence or distinctiveness of media studies (especially film studies), as opposed to broader cultural studies on the one hand or an enlarged domain of English studies on the other.

At least two familiar arguments might be made at this point. One is that the prominence or saturation of modern media in society necessitates that there should continue to be a distinct academic field dealing with them; this view sees contemporary film and television as, in effect, the vernacular 'literature' that should now replace the classics of English literature - in a parallel historical movement to that through which English literary studies came into existence during the nineteenth century in part as a substitution for Classics and some strands of religious studies. This is what might be thought of as the 'television is the literature of our day' argument. It is persuasive; and it fits with a range of intellectual positions on literacy, on participative citizenship, and on critical empowerment in relation to the techniques of representation of contemporary societies. In terms of educational policy, however, it allows - even requires - that studying film and television should overlap significantly with studying language in other cultural forms, including kinds of literary and non-literary discourse, since our media environment is one of an intertextual mix between secondary oral and continuing literate forms. (The historical dimension of the argument precisely presupposes a kind of continuity of social function between books and television). While this argument certainly makes a case for media studies, it is a case for media studies in a broad form which interconnects with English and cultural studies.

The other argument is that the specialised theoretical understanding which has

been made possible in film and television research over the last two decades necessitates that there should continue to be a distinct field - or possibly a number of distinct fields - of media studies. This is what might be called the 'exemplary theoretical discipline' view of media studies. But this view may not be as persuasive now as it might have seemed ten years ago, for three reasons. Firstly, increased interdependence of the media industries (newspapers, television, popular music), linked with developments of new multi-media technologies and cross-ownership and vertical business integration, suggests that comparisons and contrasts across and between media are likely to be more suggestive than exclusive study within any one single form or medium. The need, in such a perspective, is again for a range of skills and different kinds of cultural study. Secondly, the cognate fields which conferred on film studies its historic theoretical mission have subsequently undergone their own reforms, and now probably match media studies, argument for argument. Thirdly, students setting out on specialised media study programmes are unlikely to be aware of a number of the theoretical arguments of the 1970s and 1980s which have run their course; yet because of hierarchies of teaching and grading - and given the dominance of one theory-paradigm in the media studies secondary literature - students' course writing may still have sedimented within it the various historical strata of the discipline.

Student work runs the risk, unless intellectual backgrounds to a range of alternative theoretical paradigms are introduced as serious alternatives, of becoming in effect diglossic: in commenting on a film or programme, writing switches between passages which retell the story or offer impressionistic commentary, and sections dense with received concepts from the theoretical literature. In such a context, the often anxious, epistemological and interpretative questions of film theory may be overtaken by kinds of more celebratory academic discourse which do not worry so much over conditions of explanation: the interest of the cultural claims being made may even disguise the weakness of the reasons for believing them.

This is the context which, in my view, suggests that a crisis of confidence in media studies might in the long term prove beneficial, especially in universities. Faced with the complexities of defining specific aims and methods in advanced media studies, programmes appear to need, at least temporarily, exactly what media studies struggled with English and sociology to get away from: a broader range of fundamentally different positions seriously and openly argued for and taken up, and which therefore allow for a more genuinely dialogic mode of pedagogy. One way to achieve this is through closer connections between sociology, English and cultural studies than are typically the case at present. The exact forms of such cooperation and realignment are something that could only be worked out when discussion has already taken place over areas of common interest. What seems at least as likely, however, is that division between secondary and university perspectives on media studies - and between media studies lecturers, on the one hand, and English and sociology lecturers, on the other - may virtually paralyse the field at the very time when the need and demand for it, as seen from outside - as well as the challenges within it - are greatest.

NOTES

I am grateful to Sarah Thornton for comments on an earlier version of this article.

1. Len Masterman, *Teaching the Media* (London: Comedia, 1985, revised edition, 1989), p.332.
2. See, for example, Manuel Alvarado, Robin Gutch and Tana Wollen (eds.), *Learning the Media: an Introduction to Media Teaching* (London: Macmillan, 1987), chapter 1, pp.9-38, or the descriptions offered throughout Len Masterman,

op.cit. Useful background can also be found in many of the chapters in Robert C.Allen (ed.), *Channels of Discourse: Television and Contemporary Criticism* (London: Methuen, 1987).

3. See Francis Mulhern, *The Moment of Scrutiny* (London: NLB, 1979); Margaret Mathieson, *The Preachers of Culture: A Study of English and its Teachers* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1975); Chris Baldick, *The Social Mission of English Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983). For a detailed account of I.A.Richards's attitudes towards media, see John Paul Russo, *I.A.Richards: His Life and Work* (London: Routledge, 1989).
4. Raymond Williams, "The Future of "English Literature"", a lecture given to Oxford English Limited in 1987, reprinted in *What I Came to Say* (London: Hutchinson Radius, 1990), pp.147-56. The later stages of that essay read like a manifesto for studying contemporary 'literature' largely through media texts.
5. For recent discussion of many of these issues, see Jack Goody, *The Interface between the Written and the Oral* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987). A review of the relation between arguments over orality and literacy and political questions can be found in Brian Street, *Literacy in Theory and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).
6. See, for examples of this work, Ien Ang, *Watching 'Dallas': Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination* (London: Methuen, 1985); Charlotte Brunsdon, 'Text and Audience', in, Ellen Seiter et al (eds.), *Remote Control* (London: Routledge, 1989); David Morley, *Family Television: Cultural Power and Domestic Leisure* (London: Comedia, 1986), and, 'Where the global meets the local: notes from

the sitting room', *Screen* volume 32 number 1 (1991), 1-15.

7. A notable exception to this tendency can be found in the work of Terry Lovell, in both fields. See, *Pictures of Reality: Aesthetics, Politics and Pleasure* (London: BFI, 1980) and *Consuming Fiction* (London: Verso, 1987).
8. For discussion, see, Alvarado, Gutch and Wollen, op cit, especially pp.28-35. As regards the situation at primary levels, see also, Cary Bazalgette (ed.), *Primary Media Education: A Curriculum Statement* (London: BFI, 1989).
9. For general descriptions of work along these lines, see introductory textbooks such as John Fiske, *Introduction to Communication Studies* (London: Methuen, 1982), or Denis McQuail, *Communication* (London: Longman, 1975). In the area of 'applied' discourse analysis, see also Max Atkinson, *Our Masters' Voices: the Language and Body Language of Politics* (London: Methuen, 1984) and Deborah Tannen, *Talking Voices: Repetition, Dialogue, and Imagery in Conversational Discourse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).
10. As regards arguments over 'specificity' and the interrelationship between media studies and cognate fields, one indication of interchange is the influence of particular articles. Note, for instance, the very wide-ranging citation of Laura Mulvey's 'Visual pleasure and narrative cinema', first published in *Screen* volume 16 number 3 (1975), pp.1-18.
11. Robert Lapsley and Michael Westlake, *Film Theory: an Introduction* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988). See especially pp.218-9.

12. See, for examples, work cited in Dick Leith and George Myerson, *The Power of Address: Explorations in Rhetoric* (London: Routledge, 1989); Norman Fairclough, *Language and Power* (London: Longman, 1989).
13. Different kinds of exception, to this tendency can be found in Claudia Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music* (London: BFI, 1987); Steve Neale, *Cinema and Technology: Image, Sound, Colour* (London: BFI/Macmillan, 1985), esp. chapters 4 and 6; Simon Frith, 'Music for Pleasure', *Screen Education* 34 (1980), 50-61; Alan Durant, *Conditions of Music* (London: Macmillan, 1984), chapter 4.
14. Michael L. Geis, *The Language of Advertising* (New York: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich, 1982).